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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the procedures for assessing specific content in books, suggests some ideas for activities which adolescents could select to demonstrate that they can recognize and judge certain elements in books, and lists several cautions which need to be considered when analyzing content. The first procedure in a content analysis might be to ask the adolescent reader to become acquainted with the beginning of the story and to meet the main character or characters. The second step for a content analyst is to recognize and judge setting. There are six key words which may help the reader recognize setting: social, economic, religious, physical, political and psychological. The third step for the content analyst might be to recognize and judge the plot. The next steps are to compare and contrast the personality characteristics of the main characters at the beginning and at the end of the selection and to recognize and judge the theme in realistic fiction. Teachers are warned that content analysis procedures should be used as guides and encouraged to allow the adolescent reader to be creative in attaining the general spirit of these procedures. (LL)

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# GETTING THE MESSAGE VIA CONTENT ANALYSIS

BY

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If, indeed, some books do affect the attitudinal growth of adolescents and if a positive chemistry does exist between reading selected books and the personality development of the adolescent, then one question might be: What is in some of the literature which can affect the adolescent reader? If books for adolescents can be didactic instruments, then what do some of the books contain that can be used to help adolescents develop their values, attitudes and beliefs?

The question "What do the books contain?" Is what I'm responding to in this paper. I would like to provide a starting point here for students, teachers, parents and others who wish to begin their own content analysis of realistic fiction.[1] I'll be discussing some of the procedures for assessing specific content in books, sharing some ideas for activities which adolescents could select to demonstrate that they can recognize and judge certain elements in books and listing several cautions which need to be considered when analyzing content.[2]

Simple as it sounds, every selection of realistic fiction needs a beginning, a middle and an end. So, the first procedure in a content analysis might be to ask the adolescent reader to become acquainted with the beginning of the story and to meet the main character or characters. After the reader has demonstrated

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[1]Roberts, Patricia Lee Brighton, The Female Image in the Caldecott Medal Award Books (Bureau of Research and Field Services, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California, 95211, Spring, 1976), Monograph Number 11; see also Intellect, "News and Views: Literature," pp. 215-216., Society for the Advancement of Education, 1860 Broadway, New York, NY 10023, December, 1975, Vol. 104, No. 2370.

[2]Goforth, Grances S. and William West, "How Should Teachers Handle the Literature Students Are Reading?" Language Arts, Nov/Dec., 1975, pp. 1135-1140.

an ability to identify the main characters in a selection, the adolescent could plan to be more specific in his or her identification and round out one or more characters by describing the physical characteristics of a selected character.

The second step for a content analyst is to recognize and judge setting. The teacher may want to confirm the extent to which a particular setting lies within the actual experiences of some adolescents.[3] This is an important factor which helps illustrate the premise that people can take in and understand best those experiences which they can relate to their lives in some way. There are six key words which may help the reader recognize setting: social, economic, religious, physical, political and psychological.

The first letters of these six words form an acronym of $P_3ERS$ -- the $P_3ERS$ Phenomena -- which can be used as an aid in recognizing and judging setting. Each one of these key words can elicit a reader's response to the question "where?". When a teacher wants the adolescent to take a step towards clarity in demonstrating his or her competency in recognizing and judging setting, the teacher could consider the strength which can be added to an analysis of setting by asking the adolescent to select a plan or mini-program for the presentation of a book's setting. For example, activities for involving students in giving a presentation about a selection's setting may be preparation of a trucker's log book, an 007 file, a CIA file or FBI file, a travel folder or brochure, designing a map, or writing different lyrics to a popular song. In the trucker's log books and the files the student can prepare a list of details about the setting while in the travel folder or brochure the reader can prepare

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[3]Corman, Cheryl, "Bibliotherapy -- Insight for the Learning Handicapped," Language Arts, October, 1975, Vol. 52, No. 7, pp. 935-937; see also Rhoada Wald, "Realism in Children's Literature," op. cit., pp. 938-941; see also Gordon Peterson, "Behavioral Objectives for Teaching Literature," op cit., pp. 968-971; see also Carrie Stegall, "Book Reports? Ugh!" op. cit., pp. 987-991; see also Instructional Planning Division, Los Angeles City Schools, Trans-Actions: Activities for Involving Students with Books, Los Angeles: Division of Curriculum and Instructional Services, 1974.

words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, illustrations, and news clippings which show some of the characteristics typical of the setting. The reader could select to design a map, then label, code and illustrate the characteristic landmarks and some selected physical features of the setting or the student could select to write different lyrics to a familiar song and include significant points about the setting in the lyrics.

The third step for the content analyst might be to recognize and judge the plot. The teacher may want to confirm the extent to which the experiences in the selection relate to the reader. The narrative of realistic fiction should confirm or extent the experiences of the adolescent reader. It is possible that the development and the arrangement of situations and events may not have been known to the adolescent but the events should be knowable. In other words, the world in realistic fiction should be possible and plausible to the readers. The teacher may want to confirm that the reader can say, "This could happen to me" or "This has happened to me." This third step in a content analysis can be clarified even further when the sequence of events in the rising action and the details in the falling action of the plot are specified. The reader may be asked to share his or her knowledge about the plot with others. For example, activities for involving a reader to give a presentation about the plot could be writing a citizen band radio script for a tape recorder, preparing and displaying ads, developing a forum news article, recording a book of events, writing a telegram or a post card.

These activities are ways to present a short script about a selection describing an important action or illustration or passage which evoke a sensory impression. The student may write a series of 3-5 ads to place on a kiosk or story board which describe the sequence of events in the plot leading to the climax or prepare a news article describing the sequence of events in the plot

or develop letters of correspondence between the editors of a rap column and the main character. The student could prepare a diary, journal, scrapbook, or trucker's log, a telegram or a postcard describing some of the events of the plot.

The next step for a content analyst is to compare and contrast the personality characteristics of the main characters at the beginning and at the end of the selection. The teacher may want to determine the extent to which the characters are ones which a young person can comprehend, ones a reader meets in a realistic situation which enforces the significance of the characters. The teacher may want to note the extent the characters are controlled and developed by certain events or responses or situations which are within the range of human possibility and actuality. If the adolescent reader notes a change in the character, then perhaps he or she could select a plan which presents the changes in the character to others. For example, the student could document a case study booklet which includes everything there is to know about the character or illustrate in drawings the change in the character between the opening and the closing events in the book, or use all of the known evidence to compose a horoscope analysis, a visa form or a passport. The reader could create a life-size body outline on poster board which shows illustrations, drawings or captions that show detail about the character or the reader could write an obituary for a selected character including place of birth, parents' names, education, interests, friends, special events, honors and awards given to the character.

The next step for the content analyst could be to recognize and judge the theme in realistic fiction. Realistic fiction sometimes deals with a deeper level of meaning than characterization. The characterization is sometimes just an instrument for probing into the value system. The reader can demonstrate an

ability to differentiate between the literal meaning of a theme and the implied meaning of a theme. If the reader wants to take a step toward clarity in demonstrating his or her competency in recognizing and judging theme, the content analyst should consider the strength which can be added to an analysis by selecting an activity for presenting a book's theme to others. The reader might choose to write a forum column, an editorial column, an issue column about a major issue explored or suggested in the selection or the reader could prepare a TV quiz show script, a true or false show, a question and answer show and write the questions which the author had answered in a selection. The reader could participate in a talk show and act as the guest who is the authority or the author of the book or the reader could select to make a photographic hunt, a cartoon display, a collection of photos, with captions -- 11 ways to present the theme of the book.

The major use a teacher can make of a content analysis of realistic fiction may be to foster more optimal adjustment in adolescent readers by allowing them to anticipate some of the challenges they'll face in life through identification with a selection's characters, setting, theme, and plot. Perhaps adolescents will be better able to cope with the challenges of living after reading and analyzing selected realistic fiction. On the other hand, perhaps they won't, but fostering emotional growth through content analyses certainly seems worth trying.

However, there are four basic cautions about using content analysis procedures:

1. These content analysis procedures should be a guide and should never become the master of all masters. These procedures provide some specific direction, however, the teacher is encouraged to be creative and to let the adolescent reader be creative in attaining the general spirit of these procedures.

2. These content analysis procedures will evoke student responses which vary in sophistication and in depth. The teacher should consider the extent each student can achieve successful performance of these procedures.
3. These content analysis procedures should be periodically reviewed, revised and in some instances, rejected to meet a teacher's requirements for his or her students.
4. Teachers and students should keep in their "mind's eye" a key picture of the literature program which is, in my opinion, to have a satisfying and enjoyable experience with books. Overemphasis on one task such as a content analysis could turn the reading experience into a literary Siberia -- a cold, sterile area which is a great distance from the warm, fertile oasis one enjoys when reading for pleasure.